

Warren Burt & BAB 1980

BB: "A workshop devoted to discovering and making sounds and sound objects, to finding, using, inventing, and listening to sound things of many descriptions, the participants to be students of any previous experience and any serious intention."

WB: That's lovely, your course description.

BB: It's for next year.

WB: "Arts 100 Concerning Ears what's in them around them, behind them, between them."

And then "Language as a Language: a venture in applied linguistic theoretical theatrics or grassroot hermeneutics..."

"...depending on your point of view, configured as a workshop devoted to thinking about language by performing, vocally, sonically, language text including poems, prose passages, instances of discourse, ensemble language pieces and others, but not, for the most part, music. Composition by group members of pieces of any of the above persuasions is anticipated.

"Arts 300

for per in re de pre con trans voice shadow breath time space span frame
sound image movement word ?ike moment thought event language medium
art form. Not all of the above are expected to be accomplished during one
academic semester. Spontaneous and unrehearsed, an art form-inventing
improvisation workshop."

Those are the ones that got you in trouble with the administration?

BB: Well, with the executive committee or the faculty. We straightened it out, though. The thing of it is, people are just very nervous, that's all. Most people are just very nervous.

WB: What happened to me in Australia was: when we were preparing course descriptions, faculty were real nervous, and what they insisted was that what was in the catalogue be an accurate description of what was happening in the course, how it was going to be taught, and what people were going to have to do. And then once it was there, you dared not deviate from it. I found that just horrible that you were, like, writing your contract a year and a half in advance.

- BB: That's interesting. It's like you, in fact, were nailed to your course description.
- WB: There's no academic freedom in Australia. The chairman of the department makes the rules, and then you teach by what he wants. He makes up the course. Or at least that's the way it was in the music department at La Trobe before Keith Humble resigned, I think. All of the other departments seemed to have a measure of academic freedom. There was none in the music department, which is one reason I got out.
- BB: I have no clear idea about what the output is of Australian universities...
- WB: Generally, they used to put out, in fact most of them still put out really conservative musicians who have no idea that music relates to the bigger world. Music ends about 1925, unless it's jazz where music ends around 1950. And they have no idea of music as a political entity, music as a sociological structure or function. It used to be that way. Now it's getting better and better with places like La Trobe catching up fast, but a lot of the places aren't. It's interesting. It's a culture that's discovering itself. It used to be really, really conservative, and now it's not so much.
- BB: You know, working with my students, I've come around to looking upon it as really a kind of peculiar sort of advantage they have, that they're coming from a very "now" kind of culture. Because music as an activity, as a culture, historically, and in the present, the pursuit of music as a professional activity, call it — because I want to make a distinction — is a very strange, frozen thing, as if there are these masters, this literature of music by the masters, and the masters may be anywhere from Bach to whoever's been added onto the list lately. But what's interesting about them is that they have no historical chronology attached to them, no spatial resonances attached to them, no geographical thing. It's frozen things. And so the landscape of a musician is just incredibly cluttered with this frozen collection or crowd of things all of which are equidistant from his head. And so he's got no space. So much of the practice of music is not much like an art but like a ritual observance, devotion to the masters. I guess the best model is religious observance. And you can see that, for example, to be a musical performer is ninety-nine percent to be obligated to correctness over and above which there's your personality, whatever that is. I don't think this happens in any other art. I think, say, the notion that there's no historical... I can get off on gothic cathedrals, and I get off on empathizing with the guys who did them, empathizing with the stone carvings and all that stuff, and there's a real kick in the sense of being able to empathize with something so remote in every sense. But in music, the empathy is not like that. There is no remoteness; it's like everything is right there. And just like Jesus Christ did not live at any particular time in any particular place, but *is*, and in a tenseless way. In ritual observance, the acolyte learns the correct order of the words and the correct

inflections and the right way to say them. This is very different from somebody creating some stage on which to dramatize their own head and work themselves out, which is what I think of as what an art form is about. The practice of music is very remote from that of art.

WB: It's like your seeing the difference between sculpture and, say, stone carving, and sculpture was a mistake.

BB: Well yeah, and sculpture, it was a mistake except in the case of Michelangelo. I guess it was invented so that Michelangelo could do it, and maybe one or two other guys that I'm not on to. I would say that my notion of a good medium is something that just finds talent in a lot of unsuspected places in people where the widest range of different personalities and the widest range of native abilities and native intensities of talent find interesting expression. So a crummy medium, perhaps, is one that produces art in some sense, frequently, because only the greatest can break through. The monster German classic is a good example of that. The monster German classic as a model for musical life is the most ferocious squandering of human talent. The festering residue of the monster German classic in our culture is the practice of a musical profession in order to present credentials so as to be permitted the right not to be dismissed as a musician. The greatest thing that can happen to you is that you're not dismissed as a musician.

This comes back to what I was saying about the kids and a question of education. I think it's a tremendous advantage to kids that they have a native musical language which is potentially liberating for them because it's something they can identify with historically, contemporaneously. And they don't appreciate it a bit; they're right away dying to strangulate themselves on classical music culture. And it's not even classical music culture, it's what I would call education culture, which probably is also concert culture in some form as well.

WB: I completely lost interest in concerts, myself.

BB: I lost interest in concerts when I noticed that that's what they were. When I was a kid growing up in New York, I made a terrible mistake about concerts. Because of being so turned on by music, I would go to concerts and be totally unaware of the fact that there was a concert happening. I would just be totally aware of these pieces that I'd never heard before and which really blew me out. I can remember specific concerts, like a lot of Mitropoulos concerts with the New York Philharmonic. In high school, for fifty cents you could get a pass to the New York Philharmonic Friday afternoon concerts. I went any chance I got, especially when Mitropoulos was conducting any modern music. If you got there on Friday afternoon and they had no place to put you, they'd put you in a box in Carnegie Hall. It was really beautiful. One amazing thing about it was that you were right over the stage and the sound

was right there. I can vividly remember all kinds of pieces of all descriptions like Saint-Saens Third Piano Concerto on the same concert as Schoenberg's Pelléas et Mélisande. I heard every conceivable kind of music there, and I never noticed that there was a concert taking place because I was so completely into the music.

It's really amazing because now, I can't hear music at concerts at all because there's so much static, so much of that psychic static from what the event is. I have this problem about concerts particularly, noticing that I couldn't hear music there, noticing that it was a lousy way to regiment people for something like listening to music which is such an intensely active thing. And separating players from listeners and all that seemed to me so fundamentally counterproductive for hearing music. I began wondering: what were people doing? Why did anybody ever go to concerts, basically? Where was the action? It seemed to me that you can't be a consumer except by being a participant. Clearly, during the performance of a piece of music, the people sitting there are not consuming because they're not participating. It occurred to me to wonder: where was the moment of consumption? I realized that my greatest nemesis at concerts which is the interruption of the aftersound, the afterwash of sound by this noise of people beating their palms against one another, is in fact the moment of consummation. It's the moment of participation. It's the moment that creates the concert because here is the celebration. The performance is the flag run up the flagpole, providing the occasion for celebrators participating in the celebration of the necessary celebrity. So everybody needs everybody else at that moment, and you need to have the performance in order to provide the pretext of the occasion. And of course, the capacity to withhold celebration is the most tremendous participation. It really, really puts a real keen edge on it.

The whole thing fell into place along those lines, and at that point I was able to put the whole thing to rest in my mind. It really isn't a musical occasion at all in any artistic sense, it's a religious celebration, a religious ritual in the sense that I was saying about it before.

WB: How does that relate to what we do then? For example, last night you performed that 90-minute piece. I have my own thoughts about it which are that most of the people that I work with and deal with, for example, don't write chamber music anymore — by that I mean music to be performed in the concert situation — but they're intensely involved in personal performance. And although the medium is still the formal presentation to other interested parties, somehow it seems that when you're doing it yourself, you put more of yourself across; it becomes more a communication than a performance, more a communication than a concert. How do you look at that?

BB: I think I might have to start back away for the question, say, at the place where it's important for me to distinguish that there's no way to talk about how something goes, how it sounds, how a piece of music sounds, how it's played, how you want it to be played, anything, without knowing why you're doing it. I can't imagine composing a piece without visualizing the occasion of its performance, at least an occasion of its performance. I'd say that now — I'm not sure I'd say that for all time of my history — but certainly, it seems to me that a piece of music is striking an attitude, it's taking a position about something and specifically imagining itself, in composition — whether or not I think it's realized this way — it's imagining itself, or one is imagining it as having a certain kind of place within a certain kind of social occasion. Now this is, I'm sure, equally true for the knock-their-socks-off virtuoso imagining his performance, or somebody writing a piece for that kind of performance, as it is for the whole range. It isn't something restricted to a certain kind of consciousness about social things about music, it also has to do with the most Neanderthal kinds. It's equally important to know what you're doing. Leni Riefenstahl knew what she was doing. She knew what the occasion was and we can probably contemplate it with equanimity only insofar as the occasion on which we perceive these things, on which we receive them, is not the occasion for which they were designed. It's pretty terrifying to see one of those Leni Riefenstahl movies and imagine the occasion for which it was designed because it's so powerful as it affects oneself — not because you can imagine how it affects a bunch of Nazi Germans, but how you might have been affected by it at the time. There's a certain impunity. Hearing muzak, as an example, at a lecture does not produce the horrible effect that a lecture might be about, about muzak. Here you are totally immune from that effect by how you're taking it in. The social occasion is pretty heavy as the determinant of what happens.

I guess the thought that comes down to me about this piece that you're talking about as a piece to be performed has everything to do with some sense not so much as pieces exactly as with conveying a message. Maybe it has more to do with my past as a writer on musical subjects and as an advocate and as a person who's had a lot of social intentions. I've imagined species of social reform in musical ways, that is: in the musical world within my past. It seems to me that *Perspectives* had something to do with that, and getting in on the founding of ASUC had a lot to do with that; the American Society of University Composers had a lot to do with it.

WB: You never say the initials, you always say the acronym.

BB: We always say the acronym. The University of California has the same problem.

WB: Right.

BB: For 10 years I was the music critic on the Nation. All of this goes back into my past. I was a child of the Depression and social significance was built into my...

WB: When were you born? Just curious: what year?

BB: 1934. My family was immigrant Russian intellectuals fallen on hard times, bounced out of intellectuality into survival mechanisms. I grew up in the black ghetto in Brooklyn which is one way I come by one section of my piece, honestly. I grew up in an atmosphere of social significance. My sister was quite a bit older than me — six years older than me — and she was a real political activist and had me marching on picket lines when I was seven years old. I was pretty aware of all of that stuff: left-wing politics, labor union politics, pacifism, all of those things. Merging into music and into my musical concerns, there was always a leading edge of social awareness about it. It always seemed to me critical that how one lived one's life, how one composed one's music, all of these things were integrated. They were fused. There was a meaningful implication in what you did. I don't want to go into all the gory details of my life except to say that the progression for me over the years has been to realize more and more that the only politics I can believe in is a very personal one — not for any ideological reason, just noticing something. Noticing that the implications of saying something are just utterly different depending on the medium, and that the more public, the more impersonally widespread the medium of dissemination, the less like what you wanted to say you are read as saying. You can't control, and you shouldn't want to control, really, how people read what you write, but you might care about it, and you might react to it. My reaction has been to come down to the idea that to make a world is to make a world of people you know, and to speak is to speak to people who can hear and respond to your voice. That's how I get to the performance of my piece, because my piece is not private in the sense of me talking to myself. That was true of my great big theory 10 years ago encoded in *Metavariations* which, I would say, is a confessional: me talking to myself in some pretty heavy private language. But this piece was very specifically imagined — in fact, it was imagined for a specific social occasion in which I was talking to a bunch of people who work with me at Bard College — it was imagined way beyond that as a statement of a very important kind to me personally, but specifically imagined as a way of constructing a context within which my own voice would be heard by people sitting there with me. And the sense of participation was the sense of being spoken to. In fact, if you remember the piece, it goes from one kind of intimacy being dramatized through a lot of intermediary stages, and then comes around to another kind of intimacy being dramatized. The initial kind is the most impersonal, or

should I say super-personal kind, namely the primal voice of experience speaking. That's how I think about it. All the grammar and all the rhythms and all the rhetoric is imagined as right up front, no distance, no perspective, no place. Everything is like in a white light. No conjunctions. Whatever those parts of speech are, pronouns and things like that, tenses, all those are null and void. They don't exist in the world of experience, speaking primally. The word "I" is a third-person word. It's always objectification of yourself, it's never the most personal. The most personal is tenseless, pronounless, grammarless almost. And then it goes through these different stages of address ranging from these various, different modes of description in a fairly narrative way to someone talking to themselves, to someone writing a letter to someone else, and finally comes around to this thing of turning the performance into something that the people who are sitting there, participating by being exhorted directly by the piece, the piece of *Listen*, and then ends with I and you.

WB: You're right, that's not in the piece before.

BB: That's right.

WB: That's why it seemed to end so well. It really had that feeling of V - I.

BB: It's funny that you should mention that because it gave me problems at first. That is, I have a certain prejudice in favor of the throw-away ending, the thing that just sort of finesses how you get off. So, I ended on this very clear double bar — I call it a double bar, you call it V - I — and spent more time than I spent with most of the parts of the piece trying to compose a little tag, a little coda that would end there but yet go off, sort of trail off with a whimper. I realized that I was just exercising some prejudice of mine, it had nothing to do with the way this piece needed to go. This piece needed to go signed, sealed, and delivered at the end, and that's how it goes.

WB: I don't know of any — I'll confess ignorance — all I know is that you were the editor of *Perspectives* or still are the editor of *Perspectives of New Music* which is a journal of serious thought on contemporary music, has been I guess for many years.

WB: You founded it. When was that? What year was that, '64?

BB: I founded it in '61. The first issue came out in '62. It really started life back in Arthur Berger's graduate seminar at Brandeis when we were all really passionately interested in reading all kinds of stuff about music: musical aesthetics, musical analysis, we just soaked

up everything we could read on it, except we couldn't find anything to read on it. So I said to Arthur at the time: where is there what to read? He said: well, there isn't anything around these days because there's no magazine around. So I said: well, cool, let's do it, and got a couple of graduate students and had the idea of doing something like that for quite a long time. It almost got started a few years later at UCLA, and didn't for various reasons I won't mention to protect the guilty. And then it finally got started when Paul Fromm was importuned by a bunch of people, most notably Milton Babbitt, when I was at the Princeton Seminar in Advanced Musical Studies in 1959. Paul Fromm was the president of the Fromm Foundation. He was sponsoring the seminar, and he got interested in the idea. Pretty soon, we had *Perspectives*. And Arthur Berger was the first editor with me, so we were co-founders of it.

WB: *Perspectives* had many different sorts of music in it. I remember, just the other day, seeing an old issue with an article by Ben Johnston on various forms of microtonality which I'd never noticed when I'd had that issue hanging around. My confession of guilt: my own association with *Perspectives* was that it was that magazine I'd always subscribed to when I was an undergraduate and graduate student and never really got around to reading. But I know that the classical image of *Perspectives* was that it was a very heavy journal of, say, thinking on twelve-tone and related matters musically. And your own reputation, until recently, has been that of a fairly formidable practitioner of both twelve-tone music and theory, and yet, in fact, that's not the case or hasn't been the case for a number of years. Not that you're not formidable.

BB: I'm not formidable. I would describe myself as a born-again composer (WB laughs) and more at the level of increasingly, rather than suddenly, increasingly permitting myself to conceive what would be just utter wallowing in self-indulgent art. And noticing how much of what I was doing at any given time — this is always a progressive thing — was, in fact, heavily encased within all kinds of obligations, the minute I could verbalize them, the minute I could articulate them as obligations, I would shed them.

My version of the story would be different from yours. On the other hand, I respect the versions of the story that I hear from elsewhere because I think they have insight for me in them. I don't think that one is necessarily so much on top of one's own activity. I do know, though, that many of the things that I did, that I have done, looked different to me and to the people who approved of them.

Let me give you a sort of personalized, customized version of this history through the *Perspectives* angle, without, necessarily, the angle of me as composer — we can get to that a little later — and maybe, more

specifically, (through) me as writer. But the *Perspectives* angle may capture most of that, because I would say that at the time *Perspectives* started, it was, for me, a frontier on which a certain number of people were simultaneously. It was a touchstone of the people who were on that frontier who really came to fruition on that available medium, who needed a place to write the things that they had been storing up and getting into. It had a lot to do with people who were students of Milton Babbitt. It had a lot to do with the way that Milton Babbitt was looking to us like a guy who opened up a context within which we could take music as seriously as we wanted to take it, for a long time. For most of his vigorously active students, I would say, Milton Babbitt was not so much a guy who looked to us like hawking correct doctrine as much as a guy who legitimized for us the kind of depth and intensity, intellectually speaking, with which we wanted to get into music and the kind of seriousness that we tended to have about music. And rigor of a certain order was part and parcel of that. It was sort of like a belief that you could really hear whatever you thought. The rigor was a way of keeping your grip on the relation between what you thought and what you were doing musically, and between what you were hearing and what you said you were hearing, so that what you said then could be grist for the mill of what you were doing. It was really heavy and really important. I would say that, for me, it didn't come through Milton Babbitt first. In fact, it was really Arthur Berger that provided, for me, the first guy that I identified as making me less of a weirdo insofar as I was just a natural born introspective thinker about everything. Thinking about what I was doing and examining it very intensely was just sort of natural for me.

So I just latched onto these guys, and I think that people like Jim Randall and Godfrey Winham and Donald Martino and Peter Westergaard and David Lewin back then were similarly just latching on to somebody like Milton who did the spadework. He built the world that we could live in.

Here's where the watershed came: the point was, on the one hand, somebody could do that for you; in a social way, could go out there and do stuff that created a world for you to do your thing in. That's very different from seeing what he was doing as what you would then emulate in chapter and verse. It never occurred to me, frankly, that doctrine was at issue. It never occurred to me that anything was at issue except that emulation, which, by me, means, when I see somebody who sounds like me, I assume he must be as different from me as anybody could be since I never consciously sound like anybody else. In other words, my sense of things is: say your own thing. If you're going to say something that sounds like me, you won't be like me.

That's the watershed: the watershed is between people seeing activity as a certain thing which at that moment represents where the frontier is for certain people, and that being on the frontier is where it's at for them, and other people who see that particular kind of text, and that particular subject

matter, and that particular attitude as a frozen doctrine to maintain in and promulgate and, in fact, as an ideology to proselytize on behalf of and maintain in a rigid, frozen way like I was saying about music literature before. The kind of ahistorical, unevolutionary model of correct doctrine right thinking: that's never been where it was at for me. That's the one thing I will plead innocent to in the formidable department.

I think there's a certain sense in which the watershed came as *Perspectives* established itself. And it did establish itself as a kind of revolution in writing about music, as a kind of revolution, say, within academic circles, because within the university, musicians had been kind of lame-brained stepchildren. Now here was a curious thing, here was a funny inversion. I think this was another watershed for me. Some of us were thinking: music is high thought, really heavy thought, and these people who are academic scientists, historians, whatever, need to recognize that music as music is pretty heavy thinking. But there's a group of people that seemed like the same group at the time but in fact was a quite distinct subgroup, so to speak — although I think it's the majority of that group — rather were thinking that what we had to do was *be* scientists. As far as I was concerned, we were making the claim that music as music was heavy stuff, not that, well see, we're just as good as you because we're doing just like you, namely, science. And music, well we don't take it any more seriously than you do except insofar as it is science and mathematics and all that other stuff.

I did this very heavy, long thing called *Metavariations* about 10 years ago, more than 10 years ago, which for me was a real introspective investigation of the roots of musical expression at the level of using all the intellectual apparatus at my disposal. The program of it was to make thinking about music rise to the level of that thinking in music which I heard in music, and which I thought any musician thought of as the content of music, namely, for musicians, music is as heavy as anything in the world. So how come talk about music doesn't really reflect that but sounds so diddly? It seems to sell it down the river. It was from that point of view that *Metavariations* was conceived and that's, you know, the formidable stuff.

WB: It's interesting because in the past, say, six or seven years, I know of hardly any magazine in the world that is as roundly badmouthed as *Perspectives*, and probably because it tries to maintain that position of music being a serious thing. What are your thoughts about that? It really is badmouthed.

BB: I've badmouthed *Perspectives* more than anybody, and, I think, with good reason. And I suspect it's badmouthed with good reason both positively — that is, it earns its being badmouthed, it seems to me, in ways that I'm glad about, and it also earns its badmouthing in ways that I'm deeply concerned about.

Institutionalization is the enemy of art; it's the enemy of thought. Academicism is the enemy of intellectual activity. All of this has to do with the establishment of doctrine, the establishment of authority, the substitution of knowing for discovering, of knowing how for inventing. I could go on with cliché after cliché here, but the fact is that the second revolution is much harder than the first. And if what you imagine thinking is, is permanent revolution, and you can't imagine the point of coming on with some heavy theory or some heavy composition or some heavy anything except for the purpose of going somewhere from it, you know? The maximum effort is to arrive at the beginning of something interesting.

Perspectives as a medium, just naturally after having succeeded, became institutionalized in the eyes and minds of its constituency so that it immediately became a publish-or-perish magazine. Having established the frontier, the frontier suddenly become very habitable and became the suburbs of academe.

Perspectives was the suburbs of academe and could not quite refuse to be, in all decency, because there were other kinds of needs that were calling out for attention. In effect, having created a certain constituency, there was a problem about pulling the rug out from under it, denying it its place. But in fact, the one thing that I hate to publish is a "*Perspectives*" article because if it is a "*Perspectives*" article, that means that one already knows what it's about and it has nothing much to contribute that's on the frontier of anything.

What people conform to is not particularly important. What's important is whether or not they're conforming to something. The flavor of something being conformed to is deadly and worth badmouthing. Now, I suppose that a certain amount of badmouthing would be on the part of people who would prefer that something else were being conformed to.

WB: That's a problem because that's still conformity.

BB: Yeah, sure, but I'd say nevertheless, whatever the critics of *Perspectives* would have done had they been running the magazine, being people who were patently *not* running the magazine, their criticisms were probably valid. The fact that you give them the thing and they do all the same bad things from some other point of view doesn't change the point that as grouchers and carpers, they've got a point, right?

I'm very concerned about that, have been very concerned about that. One of the main things that I'm concerned about is: I've noticed that no matter how much *Perspectives*, in the past, has made it a point to publish the widest possible range of things, it hasn't changed the effect that it has, that it doesn't. I've traveled around the country, including to San Diego a couple of years

ago, to try to let people know that, in fact, *Perspectives* was really interested in the widest possible range of what was going on, and got kind of negative results.

I began to think about that as interesting, though depressing, and mostly from the point of view of, well, what was legit about it. There are a couple of angles on that: one is that it's probably important for people to have something to beat up on, among other things. *Perspectives*, well, maybe I don't like it, but maybe being that which people complain about is fulfilling a valuable function all by itself. It's not great for the person being complained about when he wants to have friends, himself. Social service goes just so far. On the other hand, it also suggested to me that content did not really carry through format, that once you had this rigid, unitary, same-looking physical format for something, the medium was so powerful and so uniform that it subjected all but the most irreducibly original things to instances of the medium.

WB: Well, it's the same thing with the classical music thing. Only the Beethoven piece can break through the wall of classical music; only the most conceptual article could break through the medium that the magazine had become.

BB: Right, OK. Now one of the things that was very interesting to me was Ken Gaburo's catalogue for Collection Two. It wasn't as if there wasn't any voice at all to that thing, it had a very peculiar and special voice in a hodgepodge, a wild variety of things. That was very interesting.

The thing I realized was that I would have been interested in the physical appearance of *Perspectives*, but it always was produced in a very formal way – because I didn't know anything about producing magazines. But I determined, at a certain point, to domesticate the production of *Perspectives* so as to compositionalize its appearance. And I figured that the best thing I could do toward opening it up was to make it look like it was open more than it did, and not just to tell people that it was open but to make the magazine, physically, be a signal to people that the world was an open place as far as *Perspectives* was concerned.

It's obvious that an explanation of something is a piece of literature, and it had the very clear standing as... well, the ears have walls when it comes to explanations, because everybody's heard explanations before. Everybody knows what's given lip service to. Everybody knows that no one is excluded from competition. But the fact is, we had articles in *Perspectives* where people send recommendations from important people to justify our publishing this article. I feel very bad about this. I feel kind of outraged by it because it seems to me to presuppose that we have the most illegitimate way of deciding what would be interesting to print. But I suppose one needs to pay a lot of attention to that. It must be emanating in some way from the

goddam magazine. And anyway, it seemed to me that what I wanted to do was landscape everything so that there was no more magazine but there were things, and the things had a convenient package which said *Perspectives of New Music* on the cover, and the things ranged as widely as possible among the different ways that people could think or compose.

Another thing that's pretty significant to me is that writing words is, by me, no mean activity that should be relegated to the academic rhetoric, but it's the composition of literature or music or whatever in language, and that *Perspectives* wants to be the repository of art forms and of writing about art, and not the repository of justifications for promotion and academe.

WB: Sounds good.

BB: Well, I hope.

WB: What about your own music? I heard this piece of yours last night called *Language ,as a music* which, for the most part, was 90 minutes of talking with an Irving Berlin tune and a piano piece stuck into it, and yet it was one of the more musical bits of wordsmithing I've heard. Talk about that boundary line where syntactical discourse becomes musical and how there are a number of ways you seemed to make that happen.

BB: When I was coming out to San Diego, I wrote some things down about things I wanted to talk about here. *Language ,as a music* is a couple of years old now, and I think the best place for me to come from in answering is more like where my head is at right now on the question of discourse. Just a little, historically, on how that came about: it seems to me that language has always been sound. The problem with applause and with the way people sound after a piece is over at a concert is that it isn't composed into the experience in any way.

I think the best angle on what I think about discourse would be to think about the sound that people make around occasions when music is heard, and think about the idea of discourse as some way of making sound that gives context extension, some mode of contemplation and intensification and crystallization to an experience that you have had or might want to have, a way of building sound around sound. I think of discourse as in some sense like a performance. And the reason I say I could talk about this more in a now way for myself is because recently, I've been thinking so much in terms of performance in relation to improvisation; thinking about what a score is in connection with all the different ways in which things are scores; thinking of it as some stimulation to activity. I don't ask myself the question: what's the one-to-one correlation between some symbols in some score and some stuff I'm hearing not because I couldn't ask that question but because it's not very interesting. What's more interesting is to hear what some people are doing as

specifically what they found to do in specific response to that specific stimulation. The performance of a score, which might be words like, for example, a Stockhausen score that is not even quite instructions but just a text like in the "intuitive music" or *From the Seven Days*. It is in some mode an instruction, but, more likely, it's a literary text the response to which is in some recognizable, traditional sense music.

I also imagine that the response to music might be performed as discourse, that is: metapiece; some words. In fact, you might then think of it as a score from which some music might then be performed, and so on. In other words, it's a great chain of responsive creation. The fact that it's specifically in response to something specific — an issue, a piece, an idea — is in no sense different from all kinds of things about a piece of music such as an occasion for which a piece will be written, a stance that a piece would take to a listener whispering in his ear, exhorting him, making a speech from a podium, threatening to eat him or something. At that point, I begin to fail to see the distinction between discourse and music. I begin to see music as linguistic in the most ordinary and in the most esoteric of senses as well, as delivering messages, as carrying resonances of qualities, and imagine words as simply — or not so simply, as complexly, I should say — reciprocating what music does.

Having spent a lot of my life writing about music, and an equal amount, or more of my life writing music, I was really anxious that the two never would be separated again. I wrote a piano piece that was a story, and a piece of that piano piece formed a part of *Language, as a music* which is a composition, and in being a composition, proposes a new linguistics from the standpoint of being the experience of music.

WB: How does that particularly work? How does it propose a new linguistics from the point of view of language?

BB: From the point of view of music.

WB: Yeah.

BB: I'm imagining utterance as being a primal quality, indifferently language or music. I'm imagining that, say, a child making its sound in the world is discovering itself within the world, and is composing in no sense specialized yet as between language and music. I think that the compositions of the child are all meaningful. They're not lexical; they're not referential, necessarily. Some of them may be, but it's clear that some of them are just purely composition of sound. And it seems to me that this composition of sound, being the person's sound thrown out in the world through which that person discovers itself, then refines out into many apparently distinct species of making sound some of which turn out to be English and others of which turn

out to be music. As between singing and saying, there is no particular distinction at the primal level. Just as you might gesture with your hand or with your voice, you wouldn't consider yourself to be doing one completely different kind of an act rather than another, but just a different species, a different nuance, almost, on expression.

I think from this point of view, language is that which attaches quality, by an act of some kind of awareness, to things in the world. It isn't tied to reference and the usual lexical grammatical configurations; I think that's a very narrow view of language. I think, also, the idea of it as purely communication as between one person and another of information or anything is a very narrow view of language. Even if you take a very Platonistic view of properties of things and say yeah, a cat is some color or other, we don't have to consider that any epistemology of awareness that we prefer yellowness on the cat or something like that. Forget that; the cat's yellow. Yellow is a property out there in Plato's beard. It's fine. But how about the fact that the cat is also cute? Well now wait a minute: cuteness, that's not like yellowness, OK? On the other hand, the cat isn't saying: I'm cute. The cat's not saying a damned thing, I mean the cat's just being cute. Well, the cat is obviously exuding, expressing this quality of cuteness which is, as far as I'm concerned, just what language is about. That's a linguistic quality. Even if you want to call yellow a physical quality or something else, still, that quality of cuteness doesn't have any of the idea of the conventional, narrow language quality to it — that you say something to someone else, there's this time correlation of semantics, syntactics, and all of that — but there's some quality of how what attaches to an object. In fact, the very word cute has a sound which is inseparably, inextricably intertwined with all the other sensory awarenesses that have attached to it, and it attaches to cute things. As you look at a cute thing and you hear in some resonant way, there's the sound of cute somewhere in there; not overtly, but that animal is carrying that sound somehow, and that sound is carrying that animal somehow.

That's the way I would think about my idea of language as being utterance, I should say, as an ontological idea of what meaning is about, that language is something before it is about something, or simultaneously with being about, it is, and that the *isness* of language is where we need to look for its meaning, and that there is no language sound that's distinct from or distinguishable from language meaning. This leads to an idea which gets presented in a way that has to be sensitive to its own language and to what language is. There's no way to promulgate such an idea about language in conventional discourse because that would, itself, deny the ontological quality that is being imagined. So I had to find a mode of thinking which was very different from conventional linear reasoning and logical reasoning and is like a series of tableaux, a series of pictures each of which is utterly dependent for its feel and sense on the one that preceded but is not connected by logical connection but merely by the recycling of experience through a number of

phases each of which feeds on the previous and emerges from the previous like music —not like music, but as music.

WB: As music.

Talk about your piano piece. I can't remember the exact title, Blue Milk Where My Charts...

BB: The title is a rip-off from James Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle from *Finnegans Wake*. The history there is that when I was nine years old, I used to go to the Brooklyn Public Library and listen to everything they had in their record collection, and among the things they had in their record collection was people reading from literary works. There was one piece of music that was practically as much a favorite of mine as any piece by Beethoven or Mozart — at the time, those were my hot composers back then — and it was this thing of James Joyce reading from *Finnegans Wake* within the Anna Livia Plurabelle section which, at that time, I could just walk along the street reciting to myself from beginning to end without "understanding" a single word. But it was, literally, a piece of music, no strain. It was quite amazing to me afterward to realize that I'd done this, and that I could do this, and the phrase "my chart shines high where the blue milks upset" is a phrase in there that always stuck in my head and was very potent to me as a sense of music language which then got translated into a piano piece, got laid on a piano piece which was, in some sense, my maiden voyage into language music or music, you know, that junction. Already, this was a piano piece, which was before *Language, as a music*, which was very much thought of as something that would be refining away from my heavy processing of ideas in all my previous music down to, I said, maximum self-indulgence of musical expression for me which was to find within myself the origins of musical expression, what I really felt as what carried the sense of music for me. And it was, certainly, resonance cumulating over time and creating time. That piece was dedicated to that proposition of the inner resonance of sound cumulating over time and creating time.

WB: You said, a couple of days ago when we were talking, that you did that piece because you felt one of the reasons people made music was that they made music to hear sound.

BB: Yes.

WB: To hear gorgeous sound. And that wallow, if you want to call it a wallow, was simply to reestablish that truth for yourself and for the pianist. It's for piano alone, right?

BB: For Pianist Alone.

WB: For Pianist Alone. So you have this idea of just the pianist and the music communicating in that very almost hermetic sense, communicating that sound, communicating that joy in the physical nature of sound.

BB: Yes, I thought of it as a piece, and this is where my vision of the social occasion of the piece was someone sitting by himself, discovering himself immersed within this world of sound that would keep changing, keep taking him somewhere, and that he would be on the leading edge at all times of a crest of sound. It also struck me that hanging out in one place had a very special meaning within music because you can't stay in one place, interestingly, within music without cumulating, without moving. You can stand in a visual space and take it in increasingly, just have the details there. You could even just stand and stare at something fixed, or you can just look at a leaf fluttering, but there's no way for sound to be still. But to hang out in the same place and to be always in motion are not necessarily in contradiction. I think that there's a lot of music that's always on the way somewhere on schedule and on cue and always processing information and data as a kind of analog reasoning process where it's lost the sense of hanging out with a sound and all the possibilities of activity as resonance, and not resonance in the service of activity which is to say resonance canceled, resonance terminated, resonance, in fact, deadened and denied, and sound abused. So I was very interested in being able to stay within a sound by going somewhere all the time in some way that would cumulatively stay within a resonance and then find itself evolving, merging out into constantly evolving worlds of other resonance in an unbroken chain, in that piece, in an absolutely seamless chain, as I thought of it, of sound.

Another title I had for the piece was actually Klangfarbenmedodien for Piano Solo, because the idea was that pitch and timbre would be indistinguishable in that piece, that, in fact, the only color would come from pitch and the only pitch would always be a coloration. So there would be an absolute identification of resonance in the pitch timbral sense and an ongoing sense of being somewhere and meaning something.

WB: And why it was the James Joyce title. It resonated a lot more.

BB: I'm not sure I follow you.

WB: To call the piece, say, Klangfarbenmelodien for Piano Solo, I think, would have defeated a lot of the aim of the piece just because we're so intimidated now by tech terms.

BB: Oh, right. In fact, that was only a private explanation to myself. Right. It seemed to me that to call something something is equally to go just a little in some direction with it. It's that same point of discourse: if discourse isn't at some level of composition that's at least in the spirit if not at the level of the

thing it's about, it grays it out; it terminates it; it denies its sound; it abuses it rather than resonates it. But the piece was written partly as a celebration of Milton Babbitt's 60th birthday, and there are a lot of things about the title that are sort of punning on all kinds of things that were both affectionate and hortatory with relation to Milton Babbitt and some affectionate way that he was being addressed by this piece.

WB: You mean to say that Milton Babbitt is a creation of James Joyce (BB and WB laugh), or that James Joyce wrote about Milton Babbitt?

BB: Yes I think so, I think so. And maybe vice versa. Actually, James Joyce is that remarkable kind of phenomenon. What does it mean for an art to be universal? It means that everyone finds themselves reflected in it. The great classics have that quality of: anytime I want to know where my head is at, I go to some piece by Mozart and notice how different it is now. And I discover in that, where I've gone. I think the only sense in which art is universal is that everybody finds in it exactly where they're coming from, and it's completely different for everybody. I think that does make a fundamental difference between traditional discourse and art. Traditional discourse delivers its message: yes or no, one hundred percent or zero, that's it, terminal, whereas one thinks of a work of art as just loaded with the resonances of all the things about a stage on which people dramatize themselves, and therefore has all kinds of ways in and ways out for anybody. I think that James Joyce has that quality. I notice almost every modern artist seems to find in James Joyce a very vivid reflection of exactly where their heads are at, me included.

WB: You were talking about improvisation not versus composition, or improvisation and composition, and how you listen to improvised music in a different way than you listen to composed music.

BB: Yes. This happens quite unintentionally, I'd say. I won't even say that I listen to it differently, I find myself hearing it differently. In particular, it seems that what I'm most aware of is a sense of the sound carrying the image of what people are going through mentally, what kind of awareness they're going through as they respond to each other, as they respond to sound in producing sound. It's as if what I'm hearing is the readout of their mental condition, the sound being the text, just transparent to their heads.

WB: That happens when you're listening to improvisation?

BB: Right. In fact, I'd say that it's almost diametrically opposite to any experience I've had in listening to traditional composed music. It seems to me that the personification of the music is always the essential thing, and that even some very particular suppression of whatever might be going on in someone's head literally as person performing or as audience or something like that on the grounds that it's noise in the channel, that, in fact, it's interference with

the persona of the piece which is the primal element. It never occurred to me that there was something else going on in improvisation. I guess jazz improvisation is always something that I had related to, as something Americans grew up with, jazz, but I hadn't really thought about it. I always thought about improvisation as a way of trying to produce a piece. It seems to me that all of this is giving me a sense of what improvisation might be about, and particularly began to give me a sense of what was in it for me at the level of, say, piece-free music, all kinds of other ways that music could be apart from the concert piece. And the social activity of making music in some sense that was really liberated from practicing polishing up your piece, or finding out what a good way was to improvise as against putting yourself in some place that you had never been before to find yourself going some place that you would never otherwise have imagined, and in relation to and in response to what other people were doing, was just a whole additional, amazingly expanding dimension of what music could be and what doing music could be, for me, what was a totally ramified sense of how I could live musically away from those particular channels that I'd always had as a musician.

I would also say that one of the things that improvisation has brought home to me is the antagonism of skill as a category and art as an activity. You see, the idea that one learns how to do something rather than one struggles to do something, I think is pernicious. I think that the education culture and the skill culture and the display culture and the concert culture, which is part of what produces that bad medium of music I was talking about before, it seems to me, those really obscure the question of what's in it for the person doing it and what's in it for other people that is of interest, by imagining that you can't possibly do anything that's artistically interesting without developing a high degree of preliminary skill. What's curious about that, or a very good illustration of what's wrong with that is: play a record some time of some kids doing musical games in a schoolyard. Play it for yourself and play it for your friends — even if they happen to be musicians, they may be hard cases but, I think, still viable — and notice that no one fails to be interested in listening to this record although it exhibits no known or certifiable musical skill whatever. And notice that people work for many, many years to get up to the level where they can do things of no interest to anybody, with enormous skill, and at that level only a few things break free, break out of the mold, and you just build up this whole medium of skills in which very little interesting can happen. Whereas you notice that obviously something is wrong when it's possible for a medium to exist in which not only are those kids freely acting within and freely coming out on, but anybody listening to it can relate to it as a perceived experience, not just by knowing about it ideologically, and not just because we all like kids or something. How come we can get interested in it? How come we can watch what kids are doing with interest when they clearly not only have no skills, but no concept of skill, and there's some real effort to come out on something which isn't associated with

applying something learned as a separate, independent technique. (Inaudible
aside by Ben.)

WB: That sounds good.

BB: OK. I feel like I'm making speeches.